

Roaming the African, Er, Philippine Plains

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Some of the 35 Grévy's zebras at Calauit Safari Park in the Philippines. Credit...Alex Frew McMillan

By Alex Frew McMillan

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CALAUIT, PHILIPPINES — The scene is familiar to anyone who has been on safari in eastern or southern Africa. Giraffes amble from tall tree to tall tree, nibbling away at tiny leaves. Zebras graze the short grass, their heads bent low. There are deer in the distance, and a hawk whirls overhead.

Only this is Southeast Asia, not Africa.

Calauit Safari Park is one of the oddest and least-known attractions of the Philippines, a haven for African wildlife that has operated for close to 40 years.

In 1976, Ferdinand Marcos, then president of the Philippines, traveled to Kenya for a summit meeting. The Kenyan government had asked the International Union for Conservation of Nature for help in conserving its wildlife and, as a result of his trip, Mr.

Marcos established Calauit as a nature reserve for some of its animals. The site opened to the public in 2009.

The park, which covers 3,760 hectares, or 9,291 acres, sits on a peninsula that is linked by a narrow marshy isthmus to Busuanga Island. It is the northernmost major island in Palawan, the westernmost province of the Philippines, and one of its most pristine. (Reaching Busuanga involves a scenic one-hour flight southwest of Manila, over mountainous Mindoro Island and then azure seas and the pale cream coral of the twin atolls of Apo Reef, one of the top dive destinations in the Philippines.)

Calauit is said to have been chosen for its isolation, which reduced the chances of disease and poaching, as well as its resemblance to the African wilds. Around 40 percent of the park land is an extended plain, leading to undulating hills and then mountains, which make up another 40 percent.

There has been persistent speculation over the years that Mr. Marcos actually established the preserve not for conservation but because his son was a keen hunter. “That is not true at all,” said Orlando Cruz, a park warden and guide. “The Kenyan government asked for help, and Marcos accepted the challenge.”

Initially, there were 104 animals, including giraffes, zebras and six types of antelope: bushbuck, eland, impala, Thomson’s gazelle, topi and waterbuck. Over time, the impala, Thomson’s gazelle and topi died out, mainly because of infighting, according to park staff members — although poaching has also been an occasional threat.

In 2005, the last time a census was conducted, the park had 480 descendants of the African animals and 1,390 local animals, including species like the mouse deer, an antelope the size of a small dog.

And when a recent tour came across some of the 35 Grévy’s zebras on the island, Mr. Cruz said, “They are all Filipino, not African.”

As Grévy’s zebras are considered the most endangered of the world’s three surviving zebra species, the park is proud that they have thrived here. But it is not always easy going. Some of the giraffes seen on the same tour bore the purple marks of iodine that park staff use to treat cuts from the sharp spikes of some local plants.

The park also is a haven for indigenous wildlife like the Calamian deer, named for the Calamian islands, the northernmost island cluster in Palawan province, a group that includes Busuanga.

There were only 25 left on the island when the park started a conservation effort in 1981, capturing deer for breeding and protecting them once they were released back into the wild. Now there is a thriving herd of 880.

Some of the Filipino species are kept in pens, like the Palawan porcupines. Visitors are allowed to feed them, and apparently they have a passion for bananas.

Visitors are generally escorted around the park in an open-sided truck, which stops when new animals are encountered. The guides may keep guests at a safe distance from some animals, but even young children are welcome to feed the deer.

And while each tour tries to get a look at the giraffes and the eland, one of the largest antelope species, the guides do not promise anything. “They’re free-ranging,” Mr. Cruz said, “and sometimes they head into the hills.”

Staff members say they are excited that the park now attracts visitors from around the world, with an influx of Chinese at Lunar New Year and plenty of Europeans during the summer months.

“The concept is very fruitful, worthwhile for Filipinos as well,” said the park’s manager, Froilan Sariago.

But the Balik-Caluit, a group of local islanders who were relocated when the park was created, are trying now to lodge a claim with the government.

Mr. Sariago contends that they are just opportunists who want control of the park for their own benefit.

“I was around,” he said. “I know the negotiations. They were compensated well. I’m also a local from Busuanga. We should be happy to have this kind of place. It was magic that this park was located very close to us.”

Getting to Calauit

The park is open daily from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tours are 400 pesos, or \$9.85, for non-Filipinos, or 1,000 pesos per group.

Camping is 350 pesos for as many as seven people, and 50 pesos for each additional person. There also is a dormlike building at the park that sleeps as many as 20.

Most visitors arrive by car and then speedboat from the town of Coron, famed for its wreck diving, on the south side of the island, or by boat from the handful of resorts dotted around the north coast of Busuanga. (Travelers with snorkel gear in those waters may encounter dugong, the manateelike marine mammals that feed on the sea grass in the shallows just off the islands.)

The safari park does not have a Web page. Some information is available from the [Palawan Council for Sustainable Development’s Web site](#), although it calls the park by its former name, the Calauit Game Preserve and Wildlife Sanctuary.